

ALL IN GOOD TIME

Amongst all of the towns and cities in the world that you have never heard of, the city of Liverpool is most probably not one of them. Sitting, as it does, on the banks of the English river Mersey, Liverpool is famous for many things. Not least of all there is the matter of a certain group of musicians and a couple of rather well known football teams (that's 'soccer' if you are in the USA). There are some who might suggest that the city of Liverpool is infamous rather than famous; that it has a certain reputation for ill doing amongst some of its residents. It could even be suggested that those of us who hail from this great city and carry forth with us the unmistakeable 'scouse' accent will find that, from time to time, we are mistrusted at best and looked down upon at worst. 'Surely not,' you might say, 'surely not in these enlightened times would such a thing as a strong local accent be the cause of any misjudgement?' Well, you may be inclined to think otherwise if you speak with a broad Scouse, Black Country, Birmingham, Geordie, East End of London or Glaswegian accent, to name but a few from the British isles.

Reputations are generally little more than that, and we oft times find that they are mostly unwarranted and undeserved. When I last visited Liverpool, I did, in all fairness, have cause to wonder for a while. Having been despatched there by my employer to attend a European Union working party designed to look at the future of specialist housing for older people, I arrived by train at Liverpool Lime Street station in the midst of a cool late autumn evening. I knew that the hotel wherein the three-day event was taking place was only a short walk of maybe five minutes from the train station. I was keen to stretch my legs and get a little in the way of fresh air before joining the other delegates, none of whom were known to me, and most of whom had travelled from other European countries. Walking towards the station exit doors I carried a holdall and nothing else, having come straight from a full day at my job. I was a little hungry but safe in the knowledge that the organisers would be feeding us this evening. A

well-worn man of average height and build stepped towards me. He was older than I, perhaps in his mid fifties. A quick glance told me that he had almost certainly consumed at least one, though likely several alcoholic beverages, and that this was not an unusual thing for him to do. My work took me into contact with older homeless men and entrenched street drinkers on a daily basis. I would not be a person to be intimidated by such as the approaching gentleman, and I greeted him quite happily. "You alright fella?" I asked with a bold friendliness. His reply came in the form of an unannounced and not anticipated fist, as he took a swing at me with his burly right arm. I was never slow, and I had learned that in some way I should always be on guard. I moved my head quickly to the left. He missed. As his fist swung past my head I used my right arm to gently encourage him to continue the momentum he had started, and watched with only passing interest as he tripped over his own feet before landing heavily on the cold concrete flooring. "Welcome to Liverpool," I declared openly, chuckling to myself as I walked away and onto the street outside. Had that been my only experience it would have been forgivable for me to form a certain opinion about the grand old city, but of course, that is not how it is. The great majority of the folk there are warm, welcoming, 'say it as they see it' types who derive some satisfaction from their working class background and traditions. When the time came, I was sorry to leave.

Liverpool, in common with the likes of Belfast and Glasgow, is one of those British cities with some history of sectarianism, as catholic and protestant people lived together amidst a mood of often simmering tension. In its history, the city had attracted large numbers from the easily accessible nation of Ireland, many stopping by on their way to the greener pastures of America as they sought to escape hardship and famine. By the mid 19th century, Liverpool's Irish born population stood in the region of 83,000. To bring that into perspective, one person out of every five living in the city at that time had been born in Ireland. Very few Irish towns or cities could boast such a population as that.

Stepping forward into the early twenty first century it is estimated that up to seventy five percent of the modern day population of over

half a million Liverpudlians, have some measure of Irish blood flowing through their veins. It comes as no kind of surprise therefore, to learn that the city has and continues to have a strong and active Roman Catholic Church with a significant Irish influence, or something like that.

The two football clubs of which mention has already been made are, of course, Liverpool and Everton. I will resist the temptation to offer any determination as to which is the more famous of the two. As we know, Liverpool is a place. Everton is also a place. It is an inner city area in the northern part of Liverpool, and for a long time, has been home to many people of Irish descent, something of a catholic stronghold perhaps. It was into this stronghold that Mike was born in the middle of the 1950's. Most European nations had been enduring austerity and continued rationing as they had endeavoured to recover from yet another intensive period of war and destruction across the continent, but now, there were some signs that improvement was taking hold. Liverpool and the people living there had a strength of character that would enable them to be at the forefront of the brighter times that would soon be coming.

As the first-born of a catholic family Mike's tenure as the 'only child' ended when he was no more than eleven months of age. This is how it was. Large families, no use of contraception allowed, and plenty of mouths to feed. As a child you learned how to get what you needed. Your mother worked hard every day to meet those needs as best she was able, and to do it in a reasonably clean home. Not an easy task when you ended up with seven children and a husband who's work as a long distance lorry driver meant that he was away from home for long periods. These were the days in which the British motorway network was in its infancy. It was especially common for lorry drivers to be away from home for two and three nights at a time. Indeed, it was not unheard of for such drivers to have more than one home and more than one family to support, neither of which was aware of the existence of the other. Thankfully, Mike's father was not of that ilk, though his opportunity to be a genuine and reliable example of a father to his children was somewhat lacking. "My father was always away and, to be honest, he wasn't much of an influence. I can't say that

he was a proper 'dad'. We didn't have a proper 'dad'. I don't mean that in a horrible way. It's just the way it was." In the minds of many men of that generation, the role of parenting the children was almost the sole responsibility of the mother. A father, if you had one, would most likely be the family disciplinarian. He would be the sole breadwinner. Ideally, he would also be some kind of a role model, especially for those who were his sons. But not for this son of Liverpool. His role model and educator was going to be the Catholic church of All Saints and its associated primary and junior school.

It is a school with a long enough history. Today, it declares proudly the words of none other than Pope Francis, expounding that 'each one of you is a child of God.' That may be true, but to a young man growing up there, in the early 1960's, the reality was to be found somewhere else. "The nuns were vicious, absolutely vicious," Mike tells us with an almost nonchalant expression, an acceptance that this is the way they were. There is something most certainly 'not right' about such a description when it is applied to a nun, but it was very common to hear such from the mouths of many young children who came into contact with them. A nun is probably not the correct term to use. Nuns are generally those who live in a secluded place, the ones that are 'cloistered'. Those serving in the community are more likely known as 'sisters'. Either way, these are people who have made vows. They have sworn an intention to be obedient to none other than Jesus Christ and therefore, to seek to be like him. Whatever or whoever Jesus was or is, there is nothing to suggest that he was ever vicious to anyone, and particularly not to children. Maybe if he had been trying to contain a class of thirty or more of them at the same time, and doing it on a regular basis without any pay then it is possible that his patience would have been tested from time to time. We cannot know if that would be so, but there is some measure of certainty to the assurance that he would not, in any time or era, have been measurably guilty of any behaviour that would cause a man to shudder some fifty years after the event.

Of course, not all of the nuns were vicious. Some were more inclined to gentleness than others, some were kind, and some were a much better example of the one they claimed to follow. However, they were all part

of a system. Where the families were Catholic the children would attend a certain school, invariably one that was controlled by and attached to a designated church. Children would be taught the rights and the wrongs of life within an environment of fear and punishment. God was there to scare the living daylights out of you, and for Mike, that is all it came down to. "I learned that God was a severe character. He was someone just waiting to zap you if you did anything wrong." The doing of something wrong was never far from the surface for children of Mike's generation. One of the most substantial of 'wrongs' was a simple act of omission. By not attending church on Sunday you were guilty. Many parents there were who simply did not go, but the catholic children had little or no choice. For those that did not go as they ought, there would be a Monday morning visit to the schoolroom from the severe and daunting priest, who would, with great efficiency, add guilt to the prevailing atmosphere of fear. Guilt and fear, two hugely significant, damaging and destructive concepts that, on the face of it, seem to bear no relation to the life of the one known to us as Jesus the Christ. "You had to go to church on Sunday," Mike remembers with no fondness or any sense of joy. "It was a duty. You were frightened not to go. You're a catholic so you have to go, you didn't question anything, and nobody explained anything to you. It's what you were. If your family was catholic then so were you. If your dad was a Liverpool supporter, then so were you. On Monday morning, kids would be terrified at the sight of the priest." A man of God, the very presence of whom brings terror into the life and the mind of a small child. How could they not see?

"We had to follow religious studies at school in order to be able to 'do' communion at seven." To many, the Mass or Holy Communion, or whatever term you wish to apply to it, to many it is and will always be a thing of great spiritual beauty. To a guilt-ridden child of seven years it meant so very little. "You hadn't a clue what they were talking about at church. Much of it was in Latin." Why speak a language that nigh on everybody present does not understand? It's not unreasonable to ask, is it? "You learned some phrases and responses without knowing what any of it meant." Would that not constitute a fruitless, meaningless and futile endeavour? Jesus spoke to ordinary people in simple ways that they would understand. Why would his alleged representatives be any

different? “Above all, you had to be there for the transubstantiation part. If you missed that bit then you had missed mass as far as they were concerned, and they would be after you. That is the part when the priest blesses the bread and wine and they say that at that moment that it becomes the actual flesh and blood of Christ. It didn’t mean anything to me, or to most of us. We had to learn how to eat the wafer. We weren’t allowed to chew it. You had to let it dissolve in your mouth. That wasn’t easy. It was so dry. One lad struggled all the time with the texture of it. He was accused of being disrespectful by the nuns, and they laid into him so many times.” A child would receive a beating from the sisters for the crime of not being able to deal with the dry texture of a wafer, or at least not dealing with it to their satisfaction. I have read the sections of the New Testament writings that deal with the sharing of communion. I have read them many times. Nowhere do I see anything to support that which Mike and his peers were subjected to. Why? Because it isn’t there!

By the time the young boy acquired an age expressed by the use of double figures, he was already consumed by an encompassing sense of unworthiness. His value was measured by the extent to which he did things that were wrong or were not quite acceptable to others, never quite good enough for the nuns, for the priest, nor for his own father, who strangely had no time for his sons. His daughters gave him delight, but to him, his sons were never anything near good enough. Guilt became much more than a companion, it was an adversary. Shame is something that you acquire when those whose responsibility it is to build you up do the very opposite thing. Guilt will always derive strength from the presence of shame, and although Mike had come to accept the existence of one known as ‘God’, his belief gave him nothing more than a sense of fear and dread for the punishment that would surely await him.

It is said that ‘time changes everything.’ No, it does not. As Mike grew, these values, if that is what they were, became a firmly entrenched part of who he was and who he would become. No, time does not change everything, nor is it much of a healer if the truth is to be told. What does happen over time is that we become a little more sophisticated. We learn things, and often that includes learning how to

avoid things. Mike learned that if he went into church and was present for the transubstantiation part of the service that was sufficient for him to be included amongst those who were considered to be present at mass. As soon as that ritual was over he could scoot off outside and nobody would notice. He would have to wait there until the service had finished before daring to return home, but it was a small victory nonetheless. He also learned how to cuss, or to put it another way, to use what is considered to be bad language. Over time, Mike's day to day speech came to include more and more 'cuss words', to the extent that he could barely utter a sentence without swearing at least once. In speaking to the religious leaders of his day, Jesus declared that it is not that which goes into the mouth that defiles a man, but rather, that which comes out of it. His teaching was not delivered in any context that would be designed to provoke fear, but rather to question harsh judgement. As a young teenager, Mike would not have been familiar with such words. He had been taught all that he knew of God from the catholic catechism, a book that summarises the beliefs of the catholic faithful. He had not ever read from the bible itself. In fact, he had never so much as handled one. But he could swear. He could swear profusely, and in doing so, he had discovered something that his father did not necessarily disapprove of. At least in this way, if in no other, he measured up to expectations.

At the age of fourteen years, Mike moved with his family to the significantly less famous (or infamous) town of Widnes, some thirteen or so miles distant. This would give his father easier access to his place of work, and would present perhaps a less intensive living environment than was present in Liverpool. Not long after they had moved, Mike committed the grave act of missing Mass. He could have gone, but he didn't. Such an act would require confession to be made before he could present himself at any future sharing of the bread and wine. He knew that it was considered to be a 'grave matter', an unacceptable breach of the third commandment. He had failed to observe the Sabbath day as was required of him. Apparently, that was regarded as a serious violation of God's will. It seems strange to me that Jesus would tell his disciples to take bread and wine in remembrance of him, but would neglect to mention that they had to do it at prescribed times and on specific days, or else he would have

someone waiting to bash them, but to Mike, he had committed a sinful act, and of course, he went to confession in search of the necessary forgiveness. He didn't quite get what he was hoping for. The Irish priest positioned on the opposite side of the confessional booth was harsh and unforgiving. His attitude was uncompromising and merciless. With aggression and a semi violent verbal attitude, he told Mike exactly what he thought of him. "There's other churches besides this one," he bluntly declared as Mike tried to explain his absence. The message was clear. Wherever you are, you must attend Mass. Sometimes we can be doing nothing more substantial than going about our business, doing the things that need to be done, or are considered to be necessary; such a thing as going to confession, for example. Without warning or expectation we can find that in a matter of minutes something happens that changes the path upon which we walk, and changes it permanently. Such is how it was for Mike on this particular day. It wasn't so much the words of the priest, or the telling off that he gave. That was not entirely unexpected. It was his attitude. It was the manner in which he delivered his response to Mike's confession, the contempt, and the belittling disgust that was expressed by a man of the cloth. Something snapped. A hidden balance that existed somewhere inside of Mike was tipped. "I'm done," he said as he stood up to walk away, "I'm done here." He never returned. The church that had been an integral, bullying part of the thing that had thus far been his life would have no further opportunity to add to the layers of guilt, fear and unworthiness. He did not go again, and nobody made any attempt to force him to do so.

The later 1960's were a time of some cultural change in many parts of the western world. The hippy era was in full flight, preaching peace and love as it went. The population demographics were changing in many of the larger towns and cities of the United Kingdom as immigration became increasingly visible. Skinheads emerged with their inherent racism and violent objection to just about everything, but especially the police. Bovver boots were worn proudly by some and utilised as weapons by others as the scourge of football violence made its way across the country and into Europe. The wider family networks began to destabilise as the impact of television was felt in the homes of most people. The traditional church began to lose its

influence as congregations began to dwindle in all areas. Music changed with the emergence of the 'pop' group led by the influential Beatles and many others of their generation. Heavy metal music arrived on the scene. Young people were drawn to a culture that was based upon music. Each week they would take their money to one of the many thriving record shops in order to get hold of the latest releases, and over time, many there were that built up quite a collection of both singles and albums. Mike was such a person. Music became his thing, and he loved it. He would listen to a great variety of bands, but was drawn especially to the heavy rock music. He liked the strong stuff. Every day would begin with the selection of a song or an album. He would play music before he did anything else. For many people, the day could not begin without a cup of tea and a smoke. For Mike, there had to be a song to set him up for the day before he could step out into the world.

The ordinary working class Scouse lad would leave school when the appointed time came, usually at around sixteen years of age. You might have a qualification or two, but they wouldn't amount to very much. You were never, ever likely to be going to any kind of university. That was the domain of the privileged, middle classes and the rich kids. You knew that was how it was going to be, so what would be the point in studying too much? No reason for it. A mark of the real working classes was that you were expected to get a job as soon as you left school and to start bringing some money into the house. That was the only choice. Those who went into further education but consider that they are of a working class background, well, they are simply kidding themselves. If you were lucky, you got hold of a reasonable job, and if you were luckier still you avoided the mass redundancies and job losses that inflicted the working classes of the 1970's and early 1980's. You were either in work or you were out of it, and those that were out often stayed out to become a generation that would later be known as the 'underclass', a group of people for whom the concept of work had no meaning. The term 'Yosser Hughes' may not be one that is familiar to you. I recommend that you look it up. Mike was lucky. He managed to stay in work. He also stayed on the right side of the law when it was often easier to take what might happen to come your way.

If it was wrong, he didn't get involved. He knew when to say 'no' and when to mean it.

In his early twenties, Mike married Christine, a fellow scouser but not one from the Roman Catholic background. The simple fact that he had married a non-Catholic woman was an indication of Mike's stance towards the church that had plagued him as well as the changing moods within society. These were the days in which a footballer of Roman Catholic descent would not be able to ply his trade at the protestant Glasgow Rangers club, and there would have been civil commotion if a Protestant, that being a non-Catholic, were to have been signed up by Glasgow Celtic. It was also still unusual for a Catholic person to marry outside of the faith, but the times they were a changing. Mike wanted nothing to do with religion, neither in his wedding nor in his life. He may have had the vilest of mouths, and his taste in music would have been too heavy for some, but to Christine, he was a good, honest, decent and reliable, working man with a clear sense of what is right and what is not. Many there were who could not tick all of those boxes.

Marriage was fine. It was mostly good and honest. There would be happy days and there would be other days. There were ups and there were downs, but this marriage was duly and rightly regarded, and was not something that you just walk away from if it becomes a little less than perfect. This ordinary family simply went about its business. Mike continued to love his music, finding solace within it, and idolising the Pink Floyds and the Black Sabbaths of the entertainment world. Christine looked for her meaning in other places. She would, on occasion, visit different church services with a friend or two, and even ventured, as did many at that time, to listen to the touring evangelist that was Billy Graham. Mike would humor her, and with mischief would refer to her as a 'holy joe', but he would not take any part in her interest. "As long as you're happy with what you're doing," he would say with a condescending tone of tolerance, "but don't pull me into it." A gentle note of warning perhaps. Mike was not threatened in any way by the existence of religion. It could do as it wished, just so long as it was over there somewhere, and providing it kept a healthy distance

away from his family and did not come creeping silently into his household.

It is no small matter to uproot your family in order to move to another part of the country, or indeed the world. In fact, relocating from Merseyside to the county of Cornwall in the late 1980's was very much a case of moving from one world into another and a very different one it was. Leaving behind all that you know and everything that you have any connection to is a courageous step to take, but that is what Mike and Christine did. They brought themselves, their young family, and their Scouse accents to Cornwall. To provide a less hostile and cleaner living environment, a better place for children to grow up in? Certainly that would have been part of the thinking contained within the decision making process. Better prospects? Well no, not really. Cornwall was not exactly known for its employment opportunities, with an economy dependent upon fishing, farming and tourism providing seasonal work at best. To live in an area that has less crime and associated distractions? That would be an advantage. To be somewhere amongst an all round nicer population? Not necessarily. The average Scouser is no less welcoming than the average resident of Cornwall, and probably more so in many cases. Some of those who would designate themselves as Cornish can be somewhat less than welcoming, seeing themselves, as some do, as some kind of a separate nation with a dislike of those perceived to be the English. They still use derogatory terminology to describe outsiders in that part of the world, and as yet it remains unchallenged. To respond to an annoying but persistent pull, a compulsion that will not go away and refuses to lie down and rest? Yes! There is a reason to leave behind all that you know. "I couldn't put it into words," Mike explains. "I just felt drawn to this part of the world. We had often taken family holidays here when we were kids, as many do, down at Porth Beach (that's slightly to the north of the coastal town of Newquay). Couldn't explain it, but there was always a feeling of being drawn to come here. Looking back on it now, and it might sound a bit silly, but I feel that maybe God was bringing me down here for a reason, for the purpose of saving me."

The family put down their roots, and were able to establish a life. That was no minor achievement. Considerable was the number of young

families from across the United Kingdom who moved away from urban areas and into the rural, coastal communities in search of a better life. Great is the percentage of them that returned home some eighteen months or so later with their tails firmly tucked between their legs, and stories to share of how difficult it was to find a niche of any kind. Mike and Christine settled in the tourist town of Newquay. In summer, a thriving resort filled with energetic and enthusiastic holidaymakers who have bought into the ever so delicate fib about the English Riviera of the southwest. The truth is that if you want warmer and drier weather for your summer holiday then Cornwall is not the best venue that you could choose. In winter, it becomes a place of occasional Atlantic storms and frequent almost persistent south-westerly winds, and there is no such thing as a football team with which to distract yourself. But this family were persistent, sticking admirably to the task until it ceased to be a matter of striving.

A son making his way through the secondary education system will make friends, or at least that is the hope of the good parent. Mike and Christine's son did exactly that, and soon there came the request to stay overnight at the house of his friend. Such a small and insignificant thing, yet one with so substantial an outcome. In response to such a request the less than responsible parent may give their permission with little more than a second thought. The opportunity to be rid of their offspring for a night can bring a strong temptation. The sensible parent, with thoughts focussed upon the well being of their child, will contemplate the need to at least speak with, or preferably to meet the parents of the other child before agreeing to such a venture. The parents who may harbour suspicions about Scousers will quite probably arrive at the same conclusion. Christine insisted upon meeting the parents of the boy who was a friend to her son, and they in turn were keen to meet this family from Liverpool. The meeting went well. The boys got along as young friends do, but their mothers also became firm friends. Christine's new friend was a Christian.

Each week Christine would meet Pat, as they would get together at Christine and Mike's home. They would do that sharing thing that women do but an awful lot of men can barely see the need for or the purpose thereof. Contrary to modern humanist doctrine, men and

women are by no means the same. They never have been and they never will be. Two women sit chattering in Mike's home once every week, and he wants nothing to do with it. Pat's husband is perfectly happy to have the house more or less to himself for a while. He also doesn't share the same need to build relationships. Mike would take no notice as they would sit chatting, but at the same time, he would overhear some of their conversation. They would be speaking of the bible, and of matters contained therein. Mike was inclined to some initial anxiety. For sure, the woman seemed to be nice enough, thoroughly pleasant in fact. But he was a little concerned, just slightly worried for his wife. Was this woman one of those 'nutters'? The religious type, that you can well do without and are better off keeping away from. He would be divided between the yearning desire to ignore them as he took refuge in the relative comfort of his music, and the need to keep a watchful eye on anything that might be taking place. Mike listened to snippets of their conversation as he monitored in some way the content of it. As he did so, he found some curiosity arising within him. This woman was speaking of the bible as if it was some kind of a real thing. Religion he could not and would not tolerate. Well over half a lifetime ago he had walked away from the catholic institution and had not for a moment forgotten the pains of it. God was still a fearful character for him, a guilt-inducing tyrant, but the person of whom this woman spoke was altogether and entirely different. He had never come to a point at which he rejected the existence of God. Mike believed that there was a creator, an acutely terrifying one. But Pat was speaking of God as being some kind of a father to her. Mike was intrigued by the thought. To him, a 'father' was the title you gave to the priest, or it was the man whose name is upon your birth certificate. Neither of these two had been much of an example to him and their contribution to his life had been a matter of some disappointment. He found that he could not relate to the role of a father. Pat and Christine were speaking together of God the Father. Mike had no real concept of what a father should truly be or what he should do. The meaning of the discussion was not clear to him, but as he had not before been given cause to think of God as being any kind of father, he was interested, at least to the point of being ready to eavesdrop some more. Churches, even the modern ones, in fact, especially the modern ones, they make a strong point of expressing

God as the father. They also speak much of something called the 'church family', heralding the associated values that go along with it. Sadly, and it is a great and persistent lacking, they seem unable to comprehend the reality that for many people to whom they could and should be ministering, these concepts have no meaning whatsoever. Even worse, there are many for whom the thought of a family or a father is a source of painful and evocative memories. The church seems to be largely incapable of setting aside its emphasis upon family in order to be a place of real welcome for everyone rather than just for some.

The weekly meetings continued, and as Christine became more interested in and intrigued by the faith shared by her friend, so Mike found that he would sometimes hang around and listen to them for a while. He would keep his distance, but could not help but begin to contemplate the possibility that much of what was being discussed made good sense to him, even though it was not compliant with his own experiences as a youngster. As the weeks passed by, he would listen for a slightly longer period. Sometimes, he would ask a question or two, being careful not to be seen to be joining in.

One mostly ordinary day, they sat together in the car. Christine had been waiting to tell him. She had to tell him. She wanted to tell him because she knew that it was right for her to tell him. The words of the bible with which she was becoming more familiar declared that she should tell him. She was wary of telling him, but it had to be done. She had to get it over with. It wasn't something that she could keep to herself. It wasn't something that she wanted to keep to herself. "I've had an encounter with Jesus," she declared. There was no going back now, even though she could not know how he would react. "The real Jesus. My life has just changed completely." That was it. Now he knew. Christine had become a Christian, whatever that meant and whatever it would mean. Perhaps it was not the greatest surprise. He wasn't shocked in any way, nor was he angry or annoyed. In some way, he was happy for her. Christine had always been something of a seeker, and it looked very much as if she had found something. But it was something that Mike did not want, did not require, and had no need of. "Ok," came the hesitant reply. "Ok, if it makes you happy. So long as

you don't expect to involve me in it. Keep me out of it." Mike knew that Pat was involved in a small church group of some kind, but he also knew that it was not one of the large religious institutions to which he was accustomed and would have no further part in. Had that been the case, the discussion would almost certainly have taken a different course. As it was, he was a little fearful that the nature of their relationship might change, but the thing was that there was something right about what he had been hearing. Right enough for him to be able to have some form of acceptance.

Gradually, gently, and without any intent, Mike found that he would be asking more questions as Christine and Pat met and shared together most weeks. He would become involved in discussions, dipping in and out as he saw fit. "I began to develop a sense that what she was saying was right. Things made sense to me. I began to 'know', in a way that I can't put into words, to 'know' that these things were right." He was in no way searching for anything, but maybe without being fully conscious of it, Mike was beginning to develop a sense of belief, whilst at the same time starting to learn something of this thing called 'the bible'. Pat was both bemused and amused by Mike's increasingly regular contribution. Christine said little or nothing. He had asked her to keep him out of it, and she would abide within that.

We live in strange times here in the middle of the year 2020. Those of us who are good at doing what we are asked have spent most of the last three months in or around our homes, assuming that we have one. The authorities even managed to find temporary accommodation to remove rough sleepers from the streets while the coronavirus outbreak reached what was expected to be its peak. Great effort has been made to restrict the spread of this virus across many countries of the world. Many things have changed in such a short space of time, some for the better and others perhaps less so. A minor, unimportant, yet noticeable change here in the United Kingdom has been the prices attached to a range of things, one being the sale of dogs as pets. A cross breed given some fashionable name could have been purchased for something in the region of £750 just a few months ago. An extortionate price, but nothing in comparison to the £2500 or more that breeders are currently charging, and seemingly receiving. No

doubt, many will turn to the rescue centres for their future family pet. Therein, you will find all sorts of dogs. Those who are unwanted because they present a burden that a family was not prepared for, those that were a consequence of a family breakdown, and those that were the subject of mistreatment and brutality amongst other things. The caring and seriously devoted dog lover may take it upon themselves to focus their attention upon the one that has been abused, damaged and scarred, the one that is less likely to find an easy route out of the rescue centre. They may look to provide a home for it. They know that it will take time and effort to build a relationship with this animal but if they are consistent and genuine, they will find that the creature will eventually come to trust them. If that happens, both will share a companionship based upon mutual affection, though only one will be dependent upon the other. Are we so different, those of us that are hardened as a consequence of our previous experiences?

Christine wanted to go along to the small local church that Pat was apart of. It was nothing grand, just a handful of people getting together to share their faith. But it was still a church, and only a few months earlier Mike would not have been able to easily accept the introduction of church into the life of his family. It would have brought forth from him the suspicion of a host of unwanted intrusion from something that he had been well rid of. Mike was changing, and rather than object in any way, he decided that would take a look at it. He had already agreed to provide the transport for them each week, but he wanted to check this church thing out, to see what it was that was taking place. Rightly or wrongly, he had concerns for his wife. This could be a cult of some kind. He knew of the existence of such things, and would be failing in his duty to safeguard his family if he paid no attention to that distinct possibility. Cults do exist. They often exist as a respectable and presentable set up, but are as a ravenous wolf in the clothing of a sheep. Walk away if you see anything resembling an insular group in which one person, usually a man, and his immediate family seem to be doing just about everything. They may have a small number of assistants, but they will have complete control of every aspect that might be considered to be important. There will also usually be a 'right hand man', some kind of an enforcer who will, knowingly or otherwise, always support and protect the leader, or be

ready to do so. Significantly, the leader and his family will take for themselves a financial benefit by way of a salary at the very least. Almost all of the giving to the church will end up in their bank account. People with a spiritual hunger can be extremely vulnerable and easily taken advantage of. Instinctively, Mike knew this, and was desirous of the need to know that his wife was at no risk. She seemed to be in safe enough company, and he was satisfied that she was not the subject of any ill intent.

As Christine grew in her spiritual ways, so she became more averse to two particular aspects of her husband's life. Mike's use of profanity within his constant daily speech had never been something with which she had been impressed or comfortable. There was swearing and then there was Mike's version of it. His mouth was foul, and she had often said as much. As her focus had changed and was continuing to do so, Christine was finding that his manner of speech was detrimental to her spiritual growth. It grated upon her more so than ever it had. His music was the other thing. She did not mind so much the more melodious offerings but the harsh sound of heavy metal rock music was proving more and more difficult for her to bear. No sooner did it begin to blare out throughout the house than she would feel as if the presence of hell itself was being inflicted upon them. Mike was oblivious to that. He loved his music. He adored it. Above all, it was the thing that he idolised, the one thing that he would never set to one side, not for anyone.

Unbeknown to Mike, Christine and Pat were sharing together in something that we might refer to as prayer. He would not have understood. Christine had expressed her concerns in relation to his music and his mouth. She and Pat had chosen to pray upon both of these matters, that he would stop doing the one thing and get rid of the other. The swearing was the more substantial and immediate matter, and they had prayed with some degree of desperation that he would come to a point wherein he would stop doing it. He may have been somewhat angry if he had been aware of this, and would certainly have let his feelings be known on the matter in the manner to which he was accustomed.

One day, Mike sat alone in a room at his place of work. The job of concentrating upon a given set of flow meters was often given to him in acknowledgement of his ability to attend to detail and to resist any potential distraction. This was precision work. The flow had to be just so, and the margin for variation was slight. Any error would be an expensive business. As he always did, Mike applied his focus with the required and necessary intensity. People in other parts of the factory may have been noisy in their industriousness, but his quiet concentration was assured. He had not expected to hear a voice, speaking to him within the room that he was in. He had especially not expected that voice to be his own. "If you're going to be a Christian, your records have to go." No doubt about it. That was a Scouse accent, and it was Mike's Scouse accent. The only thing that was missing was a swearword or two. The voice was clear and audible, such that it brought response from him. "What?" he replied. That was all that was said. 'I don't want to be a Christian,' Mike thought, as if in response. Wherever that had come from, he was in no mood to let his concentration slip, and he could pay no further attention to it. His mammoth collection of music would be going nowhere.

A few days later, and at work once again, Mike was on the shop floor, surrounded by a team of thirty-five women for which he had a supervisory responsibility. Only those who have worked in such an environment can know of the type of banter that colleagues will share. Any illusion that women would never take part in crude or sexual innuendo and the like is simply that, an illusion. Those who live in the comfortable world of theoretical awareness and political correctness would be oh so offended if only they really knew how it actually is. In relation to much about which they speak, the opinion of such people vastly exceeds their experience or their true knowledge. Mike was engaged in such banter, as he had been so many times before, always giving as good as he was getting. In the midst of it, he came across an experience that he had never before had any sense of. Mike could hear himself. "I heard myself, heard myself swearing. I heard the way I spoke. Every other word was foul language. I sounded disgusting. It was horrible to listen to. I hadn't been aware that I sounded like that every day. It was just disgusting. There's no other word for it." As if an unseen switch had been turned to disconnect an invisible supply, Mike

stopped swearing. He stopped immediately, straight away, and yet without being aware that he was no longer doing it. Christine became aware of it within a minute of his return home from work that very day. She noticed within the space of two short sentences. He had spoken twenty or thirty words to her without swearing. She noticed because it had never happened before. 'This is weird,' she thought. A glance across at her observing offspring was enough to confirm that they also had noticed and were already wondering what was happening. Was he playing some kind of a joke on them all? She waited for him to return to his normal pattern and manner of speech, but it didn't happen. Mike didn't seem to notice that he wasn't swearing, any more than he had previously noticed himself doing it. As this continued over the following days, the children began to quite understandably wonder. To them, their mother had gone somewhat 'mental' with this Christian thing, and now their dad had gone 'funny'.

Pat was the one who asked him about it when next she paid a visit. Mike hadn't given any thought to it. He told her of how he had come to be able to hear the way that he was speaking, and of how it had utterly disgusted him. He hadn't made a conscious effort to stop. It was just something that he didn't seem to do any more. Pat explained to him that they had been praying about his language but that they had not dared to tell him. Had Mike been healed from the act of swearing? Was this one of those unnatural things that we hear about, the kind of thing that used to be called a miracle? Christine could not help but wonder.

Whatever had taken place the effect of it was permanent. The use of ill chosen language did not return. To Mike, this was no 'big deal'. Rather, it was something that had simply changed. It need not necessarily carry with it any great meaning. Life continued. Mike did his job, provided for his family, played his music, and just carried on being himself. He took nothing that he had not earned, and asked for nothing beyond that which would be his due. On the days that he was not working, he would often take walks around the town of Newquay. A person who has been born and raised in an industrial environment will always appreciate the sight of sea and coastline. The views from the Narrowcliff area of the town are an inspiration to many a holidaymaker, but to Mike they were a part of his now regular pattern

of exercise. He stood to admire the view, leaning upon the chain link fencing installed at the top of the cliff to protect any wandering visitor who may not be aware of the proximity of danger to life and limb. How often we human beings will stop what we are doing for the purpose of simply admiring the view. At sunset, if the weather is kind, people will gather around the Narrowcliff and other similar local spots for the sole purpose of watching the sun as it disappears beyond the western horizon. They always do. They are hoping to see the wonder of a display of oranges and red colours in the evening sky, and if they are so blessed, they will gaze in awe of it, they will derive an intangible sense of satisfaction from it, and will take photographs to remind them even though the photographs rarely do justice to the event. Why do people do this? Dogs and cats do not do this. The seagulls take no notice. They do not stop to look out over the cliffs, or to simply watch the waves strolling in towards the beach below. It means nothing to them. Why is it that human beings have the capacity to identify and to appreciate beauty for the sake of it?

Mike was enjoying a moment of peaceful observation, until there came a short, gentle tap upon his shoulder. He turned to see the familiar face of Pat. He had been lost in the moment and had not heard her approach. "I have a word from the Lord for you," she declared. What do you say in response to something like that? Nobody wants to be rude do they, but really? "Uh, ok," came the uncertain reply from Mike, though his mind was asking the question, 'is this woman a nut?' "I really feel that the Lord has given me this scripture for you. Before they call I will answer. It's Isaiah sixty five, verse twenty four." Mike was none the wiser. At some insignificant point in the past he must have heard the name of 'Isaiah' mentioned in some context or another, but other than that it was a mystery to him, and yet, as Pat drifted away the words that she had spoken stayed behind.

A few weeks passed by and the strange incident was forgotten about. Pat had been to the house to spend time with Christine since then, but nothing further had been mentioned. Mike was reading a book that he had come across in some benign way that he is not able to recall. One of those books that catches a moment of your attention in a charity shop or second hand book stall, and you pick it up because it looks like

it might be of interest. It was a book in which the influence of music, and especially that of heavy rock music was discussed. He wanted to examine something. Mike knew that music affected his feelings, and this book made a clear link between music, the right amount and type of noise, and the manipulation of emotions. Any benefit, it pointed out, was always of a temporary nature, rather like a 'fix'. There was an acceptance that the affect would be different, with some people more prone to it than others, but there was almost always some effect. "Rock music was my god. It influenced the way I lived, the way I spoke, the way I behaved. You think that its only music, but it had a hold on me, and I hadn't really seen that before." Having read the book, he read it again. The more he read it, the greater became his concern and discontent. Music had some element of control upon his emotions, but it was in some way even deeper than that. He played no music that day, or during the one that followed it. As abruptly as he had stopped the practice of swearing so Mike also stopped his use of music. Something that he had done each and every day for as long as he could remember, something for which he no longer had a desire.

There is, let us be clear, no intention to disregard music or to convey an overall negative perception of it. The gift of music can be an especially beautiful, almost spiritual and unworldly thing. How much less of a place the world would be without it? However, it was once suggested by Frank Zappa, a well known musician, composer, and song writer that 'the loud sounds and bright lights of today are tremendous indoctrination tools; it is possible to modify the human chemical structure with the right combination of frequencies'. Churches have a great history of the use of music as a vehicle for the offering of worship. There can be nothing but goodness in that. However, if we look closely today, we will spot some to whom Zappa's suggestion might be worryingly applicable. A church that resembles a concert venue might be one to turn away from.

The summer of 1991 passed by, and the month of October saw the beginning of a period of unusual dry weather for the United Kingdom. British people often appear to be in some way obsessed about the weather, speaking of it, as they do in daily conversation, a characteristic borne out of the reality that the climate they live with is

by no means consistent or predictable. It is constantly changing, and nothing is ever taken for granted. Mike had reached that point in his life where he was now 'halfway to seventy'. It can be a poignant and reflective period. You have to confess that youth, or the better part of it, is now most definitely behind you. Middle age beckons. Assuming that you are physically well enough, you haven't quite started to slow down as yet. There is still plenty of gas in the tank. Your energy levels seem to be just fine. But you are, without doubt, halfway to seventy. You may become mindful of the saying that the days of our years are threescore and ten. You learned from somewhere that a 'score' is twenty, so the saying tells you that the nominal extent of our lives will be something in the region of seventy years. That is one of those writings from the bible that many of us repeat with no knowledge of its source. The actual writing, using a modern translation of the words from Psalm number ten, tells us that, *'the length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.'* We may not like to hear it, but as we encroach upon our mid thirties we can begin to gather some understanding that our days do indeed seem to quickly pass, and you begin to notice that the greater the number of days that has passed, the faster they seem to go by. In common with the changeable nature of the British weather, Mike had seen his own changes during the months that had recently passed. It had only been nine months or so since Christine had established her friendship with Pat. The period had not seemed to be especially dramatic in any way, but Mike had changed. He no longer cursed, and he no longer had any need or wish to listen to any particular type of music. Changes that he had not seen any need for, but were unquestionably profound. He had, of late, taken to reading small sections of the newer parts of the bible, out of interest more than anything else. He also agreed to go with Christine to an evening church service at a small church in Truro. He was interested to go. He had not come across an evangelist before. She was keen, and as he was happy to drive her to Truro, then he may just as well go along himself. It was only a small church. Had it been the large cathedral at Truro, or any of the imposing institutional churches in the centre of the city, he would not have ventured in.

The number of people present was not great, no more than twenty at best. Mike took a seat towards the back of the room from where he was content to listen as the man arose to address those present. Like many of his childhood peers, Mike had listened to preaching many times, but very little of it had meant anything to him. It had been something of a rambling noise, a collection of long words coming from the mouth of a formally attired priest who would be speaking of things that Mike knew nothing about, things that seemed to be intended to strike fear into him, as they surely did. This man did not do that. For one thing, there was nothing in his appearance or his way of dress that was intended to distinguish him from anyone else. You were not meant to look up to him. He spoke gently, not of damnation, but of love and acceptance. He made mention of something called the 'gospel'. He talked of grace, about the need that we have for salvation and the simple reality that we are not able to do anything by way of good works that would be of any use to us. The greatest gift is exactly that, a gift. You cannot buy it and you are not able to earn it. All that is needful is that the gift and the giver are accepted. As Mike listened, his heart was beating strongly within him, pounding as if in irrational response to something. He could not leave this room without giving some reply to this thing. This gift, he could reject it and leave, or he could accept it. The choice was entirely his to make. Nobody was placing any pressure upon him from any direction. An invitation had been received. A simple 'yes, please,' or 'no, thank you' would suffice by way of response. What he could not do was to ignore it. The option does not exist. To ignore is to decline. "I was, sort of, speaking with God. I prayed a prayer and I meant it. I meant business with God, and I asked Him to save me. I really meant that. I didn't feel anything in particular at the time, apart from my heartbeat settling down." It had not been his intention that night, but just as he had done as a fourteen year old disgruntled teenager storming out of a confessional booth, Mike had crossed a threshold from which there could be no return. He had reached a line that was drawn in the sand, and he had stepped over it.

A long, drawn out, but necessary process had been played out to a conclusion. It had been a process that had required the input of many people. A 'one step at a time' process designed to give that moment of choice. The young man that had rejected a religion that for him was

based around fear and control had come to understand something of the God whose existence he had always believed in and yet been terrified of. Great was the contrast between 'religion' and what he had now come to know. "It's a very harmful religion. There's a lot of idolatry, with all that worship of statues and such. It sits deep within you." A child cannot be blamed for what is planted within it, but neither can the roots be easily extracted. "If you get multiple injuries in a car accident, the surgeons, they don't deal with them all at once. I know they can but it will probably kill you if they do. The shock would be too much. If they can, they do it a bit at a time, dealing with the worst stuff first." Mike needed a slow healing process. Anything else would almost certainly have been too much for him.

Things continued to change in the life of the new Mike. Though not in use, the record collection had remained in situ. He had not been able to bring himself to dispose of them even though they were taking up considerable space in the family home as they gathered dust. Now, he made a decision. It was not a thing that anyone required of him. It wasn't a case of having to 'give up' anything. Nothing was expected of him, but he did choose to destroy them. "For me, they represented an idol, something I no longer wanted anything to do with. I had to destroy the idol. It was really hard but I had to do it. Some of the really heavy metal ones, you know, they wouldn't break, at least not without more effort. The ones that wouldn't break at all were thrown onto a fire. Some of them seemed like they were exploding in anger." He made an event out of it with the whole family present at the destruction of his idol. It was important to him. He had decided that the influence that they brought upon him was unhealthy. He could have sold them or given them away, but having determined them to be the source of a negative input into his own life he was hardly about to pass that onto someone else. Mike had not become averse to listening to music, and today, he will quite happily enjoy a tune or two, but he maintains a view that there is something wrong with the heavy stuff, or at least that is the case for him.

Mike had come to the point where he had accepted this thing called 'the gospel' and had come to believe that he was 'saved'. The obvious question could be 'saved from what?' Saved perhaps from the path of

life upon which he was treading. When considering the difference that takes place within their lives, those that have come to a position of acceptance of the salvation given to them through the one that is Jesus Christ will often compare the person they are now with the person they used to be. This is entirely understandable, but it misses much of the point. The comparison ought to be with the person we would most likely have become. That is where the real difference is to be found. How does that person vary from the one we are today? Aside from the swearing and the dependency upon a particular form of music, Mike would agree that he is a much nicer person than would ever have been the case. He remembers a day, not so long after the disposal of his record collection. His son was far from happy with the way that things were turning out. "I can't stand it, I just can't stand it," the young man loudly complained in frustration. "What can't you stand lad?" asked his perplexed father. "The niceness! I can't stand the niceness." You cannot always see the changes in yourself, and certainly, you cannot experience them as others do. "What do you want me to do?" Mike enquired. "You want me to swear at you? It's not going to happen. I don't do that any more."

"What's this about you?" his brother-in-law asked, "this 'saved' business, what is all that about?" "Its not easy to explain," Mike replied, "but I have the peace of God now." "What does that mean?" The younger man hailed from the same background as that from which Mike had come. He was asking questions but he was not scoffing or mocking. "I used to be frightened of God," Mike told him. He understood that well enough. "But I'm not frightened of him any more. I know that he has only the best concerns towards me." The peace of God rather than the fear of God, this didn't come to him out of a book, even though there is a book. "I can see that you're changed," his brother-in-law added. "I just wondered what it was all about. I wouldn't mind having what you have." As the years passed by he continued to ask questions from time to time, as he saw that the change in Mike was indeed a permanent one. There was even an occasion, one occasion when he ventured to join them at a church service in the centre of Newquay. He was hesitant, to say the least, and he would not enter into the main area of the church. Mike and Christine sat with him in the foyer area where he could listen at a safe

distance with the option of an easy exit should he require it. A short while later, just a matter of a few weeks, the family were mourning the loss of Mike's brother-in-law, struck down as he had been by a thoroughly unexpected heart attack. Had he, one wonders, also accepted that gift? Plenty there will be in the place that we call heaven that you do not expect to be there and plenty there will not be that you might have expected to see.

The greater part of thirty years after his changed direction, Mike has a word of caution for us. "We need to recognise that God is holy, not frightening in that way, but he is God almighty not God all matey. We do not need to fear him as I was taught to do, but we should be in awe of him. Don't believe anything you hear, and especially if you hear it in some rowdy emotionally charged church. Be careful. Delve around and check. This is important. You need to know that it's right and not to just follow others. Search out the absolute truth, and be wary of some churches. They are not where they should be. Some of them need to be careful that they don't make themselves too relevant to society to the extent that they go too far, and become the opposite of a church that speaks in Latin."

Mike shudders at the thought of what he would almost certainly have become had he not chosen to walk a different path. He would undoubtedly have retained an unpleasant manner of speech and would have behaved in ways that would, most likely, have driven his wife away from him. Becoming older and more entrenched in his ways would have seen increasing levels of negativity. Mike would not have lost his strong sense of morals and ethics. He would never accept stolen goods when they had been offered to him in Liverpool. He was an unpleasant person but never a bad person, at least not in accordance with the human way of seeing things. That said, he would have continued to dwell in and struggle with the knowledge that he had never been good enough for his own father, who would come to generously praise a stepson later in life, but never his own male kin. The low sense of self-esteem that Mike already had would have continued to develop. "In all truth I would probably now be living alone in a bedsit somewhere with my records but with no friends.

I would have been very insecure in myself. I always struggled with assurance, with a great sense of unworthiness. I would have over compensated for it. Would have cut everybody off. I would have been so horrible and unpleasant that nobody would have wanted much to do with me. I would have become more isolated as I got older, most likely would have become depressed and certainly would not have had good mental health at all.”

Many elements of Mike’s self-assessment are those that become common to people as they acquire a certain age, at least in the western world. Depression, anxiety, fear, loneliness, social isolation, and a measure of exclusion are familiar territory to many people living in their sixties and beyond. The loss of purpose and value can be a daunting hurdle to overcome. Not so bad if you have a place within a wider family network as many do, but not so easy if you do not. The single, isolated elderly form another group that do not easily fit into the trappings of the church and its prevalent ‘family’ culture. But there is more than this. There is something that Mike does not have that he would otherwise have had. He does not have fear. He is not frightened at the prospect of that which must come to every single and solitary one of us. Nor is he terrified at the thought of what will follow. He is saved from that.